

Sermon Text – Sunday, March 30, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**1st Reading: Joshua 5:9-12; 2nd Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Scripture for Message: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 “A Do Over”**

The scriptures we read this morning recall this truth: God is determined to bring about restoration and reconciliation. In the reading from Joshua, God announces the removal of Israel’s disgrace and how God made them into a new creation, giving them a new beginning. This becomes true for them when they no longer must gather the manna each morning but could feast from the crops of the land of Canaan. The provision of manna gave the people only what they needed for one day with extra for the Sabbath. It couldn’t be hoarded and everyone had enough. The wanderers needn’t worry about how to store their excess or what to do if there were economic losses – there was equity and fairness. All this came from God and was their sustenance for the forty years they wandered. During those forty years the people learned to rely on God. They learned ethics such as fairness, equity, and justice. Forty years was enough time for the lessons to sink in – so now when they reached Canaan they needed to adhere to those ethics and God removed the physical constraints of gathering the manna. The people were given the chance to trust God of their own decision – an opportunity for a do over.

Paul’s second letter to the people of Corinth recalls for us that in Christ we are a new creation: everything old has passed away we are reconciled and made right with God. This would be Paul’s reason for celebration by throwing a party and feast, he experienced the ultimate reset from Saul to Paul. Saul was a persecutor of the early church, Saul witnessed and approved of the stoning of Stephen. Saul went to homes dragging people out; men, women, and children arresting them for following Christ. Then came his “road to Damascus” experience and all that changed – everything has become new! Paul’s message is that what was once lost is now found and the response of the people should be rejoicing. In addition to that, Paul reminds people that because they are now “new creations” through Jesus Christ they are “ambassadors” for Christ and that witness is an important ministry.

This all reminds me of our frequent desires for a “do over.” Be honest, some of us would like to push the reset button for one more try to get our lives right, or at least have our lives turn out the way we want? Not all of us lived our lives as followers of Christ, some may even have tried every way possible to avoid the watchful eye of our Lord. Like that younger son in our story from Luke – some took what they could from their family and hit the road. This young man placed his “share of the property” his inheritance above the relationship of father / son or brother / brother. He seemed to value possessions over people.

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I wonder if the father agonized over his decision to give the younger son what he asked for. I can only imagine how it hurt to see his youngest leave everything behind and head out for adventures unknown. Maybe we don't get the whole story but there does not seem to be any arguments, and the older brother did not seem to object at all – at this point at least. Nevertheless, the younger brother takes off, thinking only of himself, and embarks on adventures that he thinks will satisfy. He enters a world quite different from the rural life he had grown up with and spends as if tomorrow will never come. That, by the way, is the definition of a prodigal, wasteful extravagance, and reckless spending. Eventually he squanders his inheritance and is forced to humble himself by becoming a hired hand in a foreigner's land.

The story tells us that he was sent to feed pigs. Think about that, pigs were an abomination to the Jewish people and this young man had gone so far down that now he was giving food to the pigs that he himself wished he had. I am sure that resonated with those who listened to Jesus' story. So, having fallen as far as he could, the younger son does a little soul-searching contemplation and with "hat in hand" goes home. He convinces himself that although he does not consider himself worthy, he would confess his "sins" and ask to be at least treated like a hired hand. Hear the words he used, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." Sounds like an honest, humble, and heart-felt confession to me.

Now, we get to the father's actions – maybe the son was gone so long that the father really thought he was dead never to be seen again. The sting of the son's abandonment of the family surely had worn off so that when, far in the distance, the father saw the son return he ran to greet him. With 'prodigal' acceptance and no hint of scolding or punishment, the father rejoiced over the son's return. What he thought was dead was indeed alive; once he was lost but now is found, he came home unharmed. That older brother, however, was not having any part of celebrating. The older brother obviously still felt the sting of the younger brother's abandonment and felt angry that what he thought was his inheritance was now diminished by his younger brother's return. He didn't care about celebrating and, like that younger brother, put his own desires ahead of family and relationship. That brother was so focused on his feelings of being harmed that he couldn't rejoice at his brother's return.

What might this story have meant to the ones who heard it from Jesus? Remember he was talking to all the tax collectors and sinners who had come to hear him, but there were also scribes and Pharisees within earshot – grumbling that Jesus associated with sinners and tax-collectors. In that context, we can think of the tax collectors and sinners of putting themselves in the place of the younger son in relation to God their eternal father – they could find hope for

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reconciliation and restoration through the forgiveness and grace God freely offers. That would be cause for them to feast and for Jesus to feast with them. They might have looked at the Pharisees and scribes however as the older brother – the ones who were so focused on how bad it was that Jesus ate with and associated with tax collectors and sinners that they failed to see the good Jesus was doing for the community and for God’s kingdom.

Do you think either of these groups would have “heard” what Jesus was trying to say? I can’t speak for them only for myself. When I study these words, and I have many times because this passage seems to come up a lot when I prepare for my messages, I hear Jesus speaking to me. I look at this story of an illustration of God’s “prodigal” forgiveness and grace, but I also see an illustration of a “do over” an opportunity for both sons in this story and for the father to reset their relationships. It is a message to me that honest, humble, and trusting confession can reset my relationship with God.

There is a prayer that is said at Catholic Mass before communion part of it goes like this: “I confess to almighty God and to you my brothers and sisters that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do, through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.” These words seem to come right out of this parable of the man with two sons that Jesus told to the people that day.

Anyway, where would you put yourself in this story? Trust me some of you are there – either in the recklessly extravagant son who abandons family and selfishly lives his life then comes home with tail between legs when things go bad. Some might be the recklessly extravagant father who gives everything to a child who does not appreciate it, goes off to “do their own thing,” and seems to be lost. It is love that allows forgiveness and grace – the kind of love that had Jesus go willingly to the cross, the kind of love that God shows. So, if you can place yourself in the role of that younger son, come home, come home to be restored, and transformed, come home to forgiveness and grace. If you place yourself in the role of the father, celebrate.

But here’s the thing, many of us are really playing the role of the older brother. Face it, for many of us what the father does is too extravagant and makes no sense. The younger brother chose his life; selfishly abandoning his family and now he wants to dip his fingers in the pot one more time! Too often second chances are given to people and groups of people who do not, in our minds, deserve second chances. People who make poor choices should live with the consequences of those choices, am I right? Think about those we consider undocumented immigrants, or those who abuse alcohol or drugs, and think about those who refuse to pay their own way in our society. Why do they get a second

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chance or a do-over when they don't deserve it – how is that fair? Haven't each of you worked hard for what you earned, and don't each of you obey our society's rules? What's so wrong about the older brother's response?

Tying all this together – every single one of us is a sinner undeserving of God's grace and forgiveness. Every single one of us was once lost but are now found and find welcome in the family of God. Those of you who lived your entire life in a Christian household and those of you who are new to the family of faith – every single one of us receives grace and forgiveness we do not deserve. The people of Israel who wandered for forty years received a reset when they reached Canaan, the land God promised. Paul too received that reset and encourages the people of Corinth that, as believers of Christ, they too have become new creations – their lives had been reset.

The message for us in these scriptures is that God is determined to bring about restoration and reconciliation – so determined that he himself, through Jesus, became sin so that in him we might become right with God. We, like the older brother or the Pharisees, might look down our noses at those Jesus associates with – how could he share a feast with sinners! But that doesn't make sense for us because we are ALL sinners, every single one of us. We should remember that God gives to those outside the recognized community of faith, and we must look at all those outsiders not only as God's children but as our siblings in the family of Christ. No longer do terms like insider / outsider, clean / unclean, male / female, slave / free, or Gentile / Jew apply. No longer are we wanderers, no longer lost and alone, we are new creations in Christ. God, like the father in this story, becomes the prodigal lavishing all creation with love, forgiveness, and grace. God welcomes all into God's kingdom, all who through Jesus accept the invitation to come home and be reset – an invitation to all of us sinners who deserve none of this.